Asset–based, community-driven development (ABCD) in South Africa: Rebuilding communities from the inside out

By:

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Turning Tangible and Intangible Assets/Resources in Townships into Business Opportunities
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Abstract

The asset-based and community-driven (ABCD) approach to development espouses the belief that communities can take the lead in identifying their own problems and the solutions to those same problems. While the needs-based approach tends to prescribe 'solutions' by creating agencies that deliver services to clients, ABCD approaches to development focus on empowering citizens. One of the basic tenets of ABCD development is that over-reliance on services creates a dependency culture, limiting people's potential and ability to exercise control over their lives. If South Africa is to make the shift towards a developmental state, then its top-down, needs-based, and service-delivery-oriented approaches need to be balanced by bottom-up, asset-based, and community-driven initiatives that empower citizens and communities from the inside out. Across South Africa, in scores of communities in every province, a number of ABCD-type projects are currently being piloted, facilitated by various development practitioners, and supported by forward-thinking local and international NGOs and academic institutions and, indeed, even a handful of innovative government agencies. These pilots are self-directed by communities, yet allow external agents to responsively co-invest in community assets, together with the community, through a variety of mechanisms. Academics are increasingly taking notice of the developmental outcomes and impact that are emerging from within these communities. It appears that, when communities drive their own development, they are truly empowered from within.
1. Introduction

We should see our life as positive, not negative, as made up of continuous willing, not of constraints and prohibition.

(Mary Parker Follett, early 20th century business philosopher)

The asset-based and community-driven (ABCD) approach to development extends the premise that communities can create a preferred future for themselves, based on a discovery of their inherent potential. Put simply, the approach argues that less may be achieved by identifying needs, and, rather, the emphasis should be on the assets in any given community. Furthermore, while the needs-based approach tends to prescribe solutions by creating external agencies that deliver services to clients, the ABCD approach focuses on directly empowering citizens at community level.

1.1 Service delivery versus community-driven

We concur with Mathie and Cunningham (2009) that top-down, needs-based service delivery approaches do not necessarily stem poverty, and, in fact, may even perpetuate it, if they are not accompanied by what we term a counter balancing, asset-based, community-driven approach to strengthen communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs-based service delivery approach</th>
<th>Asset-based, community-driven approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on deficiencies</td>
<td>Focus on assets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs analysis</td>
<td>Opportunity identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity orientation</td>
<td>Investment orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grants to individuals</td>
<td>Mix of grants, loans, and equity to groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More services</td>
<td>Fewer services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on government departments, agencies, NGOs, etc.</td>
<td>Emphasis on associations, small businesses, church groups, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on individuals</td>
<td>Focus on communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See people as clients</td>
<td>See people as citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solve problems</td>
<td>Develop potential</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Summary of Needs-based vs. asset-based approaches (Mathie and Cunningham, 2009, p. 10)\(^1\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs-based service delivery approach</th>
<th>Asset-based, community-driven approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Programmes are the answer</td>
<td>• People are the answer</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Often, what passes for community development may, in fact, be no more than service delivery. Of course, service delivery programmes are critically important in providing essential goods and services, to which citizens are entitled. As a development tool, however, service delivery programmes, such as social grants, often only augment basic income, and do not necessarily help families develop assets, without which individuals often lack the tangible mechanisms to break free of the cycle of poverty, particularly that of an intergenerational nature.

Also, often, such service delivery-oriented approaches end up being mechanistic exercises\(^2\), crucially forgetting that they are dealing with real people with hopes and dreams. An aspirational approach that inspires communities towards future possibilities may be what is required to break free of the powerful psychosocial mind-sets that often accompany intergenerational poverty.

This reflects a paradigm shift from a needs-based approach that is concerned with current lack, towards an approach that affirms a community’s assets, and builds on a community’s past achievements.

\(^1\) This table was adapted by Mathie and Cunningham from a presentation by Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight, pioneers of the asset based approach at the ABCD Institute, North Western University (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

\(^2\) For example, service delivery approaches to development tend to begin with a needs assessment, often in the form of a survey or questionnaire. However by definition, a needs assessment of a community tends to emphasise deficits and problems that require external agents to come in with programmes and services to solve it. Asset based approaches on the other hand, begin instead with an asset assessment of the same community, often highlighting a rich network of internal associations and organizations that can creatively take their community to a preferred future.
1.2 Community appreciative inquiry

In appreciative inquiry\(^3\) (AI), imagination, and innovation take centre stage; instead of negation, criticism, and spiralling diagnosis, the focus is on discovery, dreaming, and design. AI can then be described as extending the philosophy of individual positive thinking to the organisational level and, potentially, to the community in its entirety. Its proponents regard it as a move away from singular problem-solving, instead seeking to discover options often inherent in organic systems and the possible interplay thereof, to create a preferable future.

This is particularly important in a community development context, as it encourages community members to share positive stories from their individual and collective past, instead of focusing on problems and needs. This helps recreate a sense of pride and belonging amongst community members. The effects are often remarkable, as community members rediscover and retell the richness, diversity, and opportunities within their own community. This is no mere icebreaking gimmick; it signals a fundamental shift in approach towards asset-based thinking.

While appreciative inquiry is concerned with spurring organisational performance, we are interested in the successful organising of communities. We find that extending this to the community level requires an investigation and discovery of practical, on-the-ground success stories and experiences to affect positive change by following an inclusive, member-led process in which community members, through a process of information sharing, interviews, and group storytelling/discussions, can unearth their past successes and develop strategies for development based on these successes.

\(^3\) Appreciative inquiry, developed in the mid-eighties by Cooperrider et al., organisational design experts at Case Western Reserve University, is based on the notion that both perceived and real problems can often result from our own perspectives of phenomena (Human Capital Management, 2007, p. 86). In other words, if we view a certain priority as a problem, then we may inadvertently tend to limit our own ability to address that priority effectively, underpinned by a philosophical frame of reference predicated on the belief that “what we focus on becomes our reality.”
2. Background: ABCD in South Africa

All they see is what they do not have…they don’t see a community that possesses numerous assets and untapped growth potential – just a place of real deprivation, health crisis, hunger, injustice, drought and poor sanitation.

(Jodi Kretzmann and John McKnight, pioneers of ABCD)

Every community is like a glass that can be perceived as either half full or half empty. Central to an ABCD approach is the observation that, “focusing optimistically on the half-full, rather than pessimistically on the half-empty, glass, profoundly enhances citizen driven development” (Russell, 2009). Our own experiences in development practice suggest that, when local people, especially in struggling communities, begin to absorb the needs-based analysis imposed by external agencies and use this to perceive their situation, they may begin to forget their long-held beliefs, stories of past accomplishments, and past victories that have seen them persevere and succeed in the past.

Increasingly, a number of ABCD\(^4\) case studies across the world and in Africa (Mathie and Cunningham, 2008) suggest that beginning an intervention with the stories, knowledge, experiences, innovations, and history of the community promises a more sustainable and empowering approach to development. By helping the community to collectively identify and leverage their own social, human, cultural, physical, environmental, and natural resources, communities often quickly take ownership of their own development priorities, no longer describing themselves as dependent beneficiaries of government projects or simply recipients of a CSI project.

\(^4\) Asset-based approaches are not necessarily new in South Africa and aspects thereof have formed part of the curricula of a number of programmes in academia, though these tend to be blended with needs-based approaches, thus perhaps diluting the long-term impacts. While the mapping of assets in communities helped communities identify their strengths, its long-term effectiveness can inadvertently be limited by a needs-based response from external agents, instead of allowing the community to drive their own development. What is different in a ‘pure ABCD only’ approach is that we do not attempt to incorporate needs-based approaches at all. Our experiences suggest that this tends to translate into more widespread community-initiated actions that often very quickly lead to observable outcomes, often more significantly and sustainably so than blended approaches.
Various ABCD\textsuperscript{5} pilot projects are currently in progress in communities across South Africa, providing for a rich and rigorous set of case studies for analysing community assets and their role in development practice. These pilots help us better understand alternative asset-based approaches to development in a South African context, particularly from a practitioner-oriented perspective.

The preliminary findings appear to reinforce promising international research findings, suggesting that asset-based approaches may have greater potential to break the poverty and dependency mind-set amongst young and old alike, better help build assets, and begin to measurably uplift the community than current practices, particularly in South Africa.

\section{2.1 Uneven development practice in South Africa}

The history of the racial and social divide in South Africa frames its current economic and social challenges in poverty alleviation, as years of forced removals, neglect of rural areas, erosion of basic infrastructure, and violation of human rights and political processes have resulted in large subsets of the national population being socially and economically isolated and ill-equipped for the integration into formal society and the national economy.

Post-apartheid South Africa has seen a massive investment in government-led, infrastructure-oriented service delivery programmes as part of a national thrust since 1994, to eliminate historical backlogs and eradicate poverty. Government has promised to provide a wide range of services, such as water and sanitation, electricity, schools, health services, houses, and even jobs.

Yet, persistently high levels of poverty, inequality, and unemployment appear to continue unabated. While the provision of basic services, such as water and sanitation, electricity, schools, health services, houses and even jobs, are critical, this does not seem to have translated into empowered communities.

\textsuperscript{5} As part of a broader set of action research initiatives, the Navigant Foundation have been engaged in some of these ABCD pilot projects, particularly in rural locations, working together with local NGOs and government agencies, in collaboration with the Coady International Institute at St Francis Xavier University, Canada, an academic research leader in community-driven development. Recent community engagements range from Bergville and Nkandla in Kwa-Zulu Natal, Kuruman in the Northern Cape, Koffiefontein in the Free State, and Bitou in the Western Cape, amongst others.
It appears that, while South Africa has increasingly defined itself as a developmental state in theory, it is unclear what that may entail in practice.

2.2 Multidimensionality of poverty

Various factors, such as the effects of apartheid, structural impediments in the economy, the multi dimensionality of poverty, and recently the global recession, continue to be blamed for the lack of progress. We agree that, while the causes of poverty may indeed be complex in nature, particularly in South Africa, we suggest that its persistence can sometimes be perpetuated, albeit inadvertently, by the largely infrastructure-oriented service delivery approach that currently characterises development in South Africa.

Community leaders often react to the prospect of massive inflows into their community by talking up their needs, acutely aware that this will bring in external resources and thus subsequently strengthen their position and prestige within the community. Soon, the community learns to do likewise. They begin to internalise their needs, lacks, and deficiencies, discarding their positive stories, past accomplishments, and indigenous innovations, over time becoming increasingly dependent on the external agents and the resources they promise.

A number of development practitioners argue that focusing on short-term income support in the form of individual social grants, for example, without designing commensurate policy mechanisms to help translate that support into long-term community asset–building, may inadvertently perpetuate a welfare mentality within communities.

By directing funds towards professional helpers and not residents, and focusing on leaders who magnify deficiencies, not successes, we tend to reward failure and produce dependency. Mathie and Cunningham (2003) noted the unintended consequences of these approaches, many of which development practitioners such as ourselves can attest to, being the internalisation of the deficiencies identified by local residents, the destruction of social capital as communities become dependent on and potentially disempowered by social grants and service delivery alone, and, ultimately, the creation of a sense of hopelessness.

2.3 Going forward

Multilateral agencies such as the World Bank have also begun to take notice of participatory approaches, steadily incorporating them into their own programmes (World Bank, 2004). Terms such as participatory rural appraisal, community-driven development, sustainable livelihoods, and rights-based approaches (Russell, 2009, p. 14) are becoming increasingly commonplace in development circles, reflecting an awareness of the
fundamental validity of appreciative and participative approaches, and perhaps also taking
cognisance of some of the failures of previous needs-based approaches to development.

We often wonder how it is that the very bottom-up, grass roots communities that, for
example, brought down the system of apartheid have now become somewhat helplessly
dependent on top–down, government-funded service delivery. The influx of community
leaders into government positions immediately post-apartheid appears to have weakened
the capacity of civil society, particularly at community level. Could an active and sustained
focus on community-driven development rebuild that community-level capacity and
engender a renewed sense of self-reliance?

Perhaps then, a fundamental re-evaluation of traditional and newer approaches to
development may be necessary; one that better balances the objectives, plans, and policies
of government with the aspirations, resources, and capabilities of communities themselves.

In South Africa, the long-term psycho-social impact of apartheid-era forced land
removals, combined with arguably flawed approaches to development employed by the
current government, implies that many rural communities may remain locked in pockets of
extreme and inter-generational poverty. The trigger for the change observed during ABCD
occurs when community members choose to reframe their current reality, focusing on
achieving future opportunities instead of their current needs.
3. ABCD Methodology

At first the villagers stare at us, wondering where this is heading. Then one teacher stands to say that the villagers have many problems: “There is too much death. Our children are dying of measles, and our young people of AIDS. The old people of our village struggle and sacrifice to raise grandchildren whose parents have died of AIDS. Mothers here have no access to prenatal services. And many fathers in the village can’t scrape together enough money to pay school fees for their children!” Other villagers chime in to add more and more problems to the teacher’s list. After listening to their stories attentively and sensitively, we ask them if anything is working in the community: would they focus for a moment on the community’s assets and capacities rather than on what is absent, or what is problematic, or what the community needs. To our surprise, the mood changes to one of laughter and clapping. One after another the villagers begin to narrate the good-news stories of the proud people of Kagera.

(Booy and Sena, 2000)

The ABCD approach begins with simple and highly participative workshops consisting of various practical and interactive activities, drawing from appreciative inquiry as a starting point. It is helpful to briefly summarise key steps in a typical ABCD-type process.

By integrating a series of tools and techniques around appreciative inquiry approaches and sustainable livelihoods frameworks, the Coady International Institute promotes a practical methodology in their Mobilising Assets for Community Driven Development certificate programme. This methodology continues to be tested in a number of urban and rural contexts worldwide, was subsequently customised by the Navigant Foundation and together with various partners has been implemented in a number of communities across South Africa.
Step 1: Asset-mapping

The first step is a facilitated workshop where community members map the range of human, social, economic, physical, and environmental assets in their area, helping the community to discover and appreciate their own strengths. The process is empowering, as the findings are generated by and for the community.

Step 2: Action planning

The next step is for the workshop participants to collectively define a preferred future for their community. This generates meaningful goals towards which the community

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Figure 1: Summary of ABCD process

Figure 2: Community map

Step 1: Asset-mapping

In one exercise, community members are provided material such as cardboard, pens, crayons, glue, Prestik, etc. to build a map of what their community looks like in terms of the assets identified. This is an extremely interactive activity, allowing community members to creatively reflect and map out their physical environment, looking at the positive opportunities for the first time. Interestingly, in many communities, this is the very first map of their village that many of them have ever seen.
members then developed an action plan that connects the assets they identified with a set of interlinking actions that they mutually agree are feasible to undertake by themselves.

It is important that community members identify for themselves what they believe would be the most critical indicators of on-going and sustainable success for the development of their community going forward.

**Step 3: Impact assessment**

The community is encouraged to measure and evaluate its own progress towards achieving its goals, using meaningful indicators of observable change that the community will have personally experienced and collectively agreed upon.

Only much later does the external agent act as a funder, and then only by providing small matching grants to support key projects that the community members have already begun to initiate by themselves, with their own funds.
ABCD and community economic analysis

We were rich, we just weren't aware of it!

(Community member, following ABCD workshop)

The leaky bucket’ is a simple yet powerfully interactive community economic analysis tool developed by the Coady International Institute, St. Francis Xavier University, and designed to give communities a practical understanding of the economic situation of their community and the entrepreneurial opportunities that are possible, suggesting that complex economic analyses can indeed be understood and applied by the community themselves.

Vignette\(^8\): Quantifying economic flows in Mathopestat, South Africa

Mathopestat is a village of approximately one thousand people located near the city of Rustenburg, within the mining belt of South Africa. Many of the men of Mathopestat work outside of their home community, in the mines, or they have left it altogether and moved to one of South Africa’s large cities. Over 60% of those who remain in Mathopestat are mothers, children and adolescents, grandparents, and unemployed men and women. As is typical of South Africa’s rural areas, many households in Mathopestat depend almost entirely on social grants from the state as their main source of livelihood, although it is not uncommon for the local residents to supplement this income with small-scale, informal cash-generating activities such as raising and selling livestock. There are very few formal sector businesses in Mathopestat; most village residents prefer to do their shopping in nearby Rustenburg. In November 2009, Sebastian Mathews, then board chair of the Greater Rustenburg Community Foundation\(^9\) (GRCF), facilitated a leaky bucket exercise in this community.

\(^8\)This vignette is an insert in Cunningham, G., Community Economic Literacy and the “Leaky Bucket,” Occasional Paper Series, No. 9, March 2011, Coady International Institute, which is freely available online at [www.stfx.ca](http://www.stfx.ca).

\(^9\)The Greater Rustenburg Community Foundation (GRCF), a grassroots grant-making community foundation established a decade ago as one of South Africa’s first community foundations and operating out of the mining town of Rustenburg in the North West province of South Africa, piloted a series of ABCD projects, the first being in the rural village of Mathopestat, near Rustenburg. The GRCF had already been conducting a basic asset mapping exercise for some time as part of the Building Community Philanthropy Project at the University of Cape Town’s Graduate School of Business (Wilkinson-Maposa, S. \textit{et al.}, 2005), to explore the role of philanthropy at community level. In 2009, the author was awarded a scholarship by the Coady International Institute to attend an ABCD certificate programme in Canada, following which he initiated and facilitated a series of ABCD pilot projects at the GRCF in his capacity as chairperson of the board of trustees at the time, and funded by the Impala Bafokeng Trust (IBT), the CSI initiative of Impala Platinum, and the Royal Bafokeng tribe. Subsequently, the
He chose to hold the session during the day, to attract the groups targeted by the GRCF: unemployed youths and grandmothers. More than 80 community members attended. For this exercise, Mathews focused exclusively on the flow of money into and out of the household sector. He asked the participants to indicate the main sources of income and expenditures, and to estimate how much an average household earned or spent on certain items in a month. He then multiplied these estimates by 12 (to obtain the average annual income and expenditure), and then by the number of households in the community. Within a few minutes, the grandmothers (or “gogos,” as they are known in South Africa) were pulling out their cell phones and doing the calculations themselves.

It turned out that the estimated total household income in the community from grants alone was about R3.7 million, with another R1 million coming from the sale of livestock and wages earned. Of this income, some R3.6 million was leaving the community, most of it spent in Rustenburg. For example, households spent R210,450 on eggs in city supermarkets, R150,875 on school uniforms, and a similar amount on alcohol, even though most village residents knew how to raise chickens, sew, and brew their own beer.

This process created an “Aha!” moment when community members started thinking about how to capture money leaking from their community and invest it into income-generating activities. The week after the leaky bucket exercise, a group of women started pooling their savings to purchase dairy goats to produce milk and cheese for sale in Rustenburg. The leaky bucket helped them assess the potential market size for their business. By estimating how much households spent on similar products outside the community, these micro-entrepreneurs were able to gauge how much money local people might be willing to spend on their products.

University of South Africa’s Department of Geography become an active development partner to the community of Mathopestat. A request for the Mathopestat case study can be made to the GRCF.
Given the massive inflows of social grants into South African communities, we often find that community members are shocked that the level of assets, particularly economic and financial, within their community was significantly higher than they had originally envisaged. Participative community economic analysis tools such as the leaky bucket allow communities, often for the first time, to realise that significant amounts of money are being brought into the community by themselves, yet ‘leaked’ out through spending outside of the community. In effect, the community is conducting a market analysis of their aggregate consumption patterns, helping them to identify viable and profitable opportunities for community-driven enterprises. Without fail, we have found community members self-energised to find innovative ways to retain and leverage these assets for their collective benefit.
5. Assessment of impact

[If villagers in Tanzania can] see where they have succeeded in the past and understand why, and if they can use this consciousness to imagine a better future, they may be able to attain greater success.

(Booy and Sena, 2000)

An important consideration in assessing impact in an ABCD-type manner is to enable the community to identify and measure the most significant changes (MSCs), as experienced by the community members themselves.

5.1. Community-generated indicators

Fundamentally, since ABCD approaches seek to measure and evaluate the progress that the community believes is most important and has made the most impact in bettering their lives, this must be the starting point of impact assessment. We believe that a viable (and happy) medium can indeed exist between the indicators proposed by the external agent and those generated by the community themselves.

Research by the Coady International Institute suggests that an asset-based assessment of impact encompasses both qualitative measures in terms of an improvement in a community’s collective capacity to act as described, for example, by their experience of changes in personal attitudes and interpersonal relationships, as well as quantitative measures in terms of the increase in assets through an assessment of specific community projects that have been initiated and increases in linkages to other organisations, partners, and networks.

Current research work around MSC-based assessments by the Coady International Institute (Peters, 2009) exhibits similarities to so-called balanced scorecard thinking, recognising that development is multi-dimensional and internally derived. Hence, development practitioners should likewise look to community members themselves to generate holistic and appropriate measures of impact.
Also, at the core of any indicator is the need to measure progress, but critically to believe in that measurement in order to be able to take a step towards positive change. From our own experience of ABCD, we suggest that, when communities begin to define their own indicators and conduct their own measurements, they become deeply committed to positive change. They begin to:

- experience positive changes in their attitudes towards their long-term situation and future opportunities;
- grow the organisational capacity to act self-reliantly for their own good, and resist the dependency syndrome that tends to erode the initial gains that new opportunities may bring;
- develop the power of organisational linkages with external stakeholders, and refuse to let this simply reside or vest in a selected few chosen leaders; and
- see a broad and genuine increase in their individual and communal assets, and ensure that benefits do not simply accrue to a closed group of leaders;

and, indeed, we argue that these changes can be defined and measured by the community members themselves.

Figure 3: Most significant change (MSC) based impact assessment frameworks (Peters, 2009).
6. Role of external change agents

The people will use what they have to secure what they have not”

(Rev. Moses Coady, Founder of the Coady International Institute, St. Francis Xavier University)

We find in ABCD engagements an alternative entry point for external actors, such as government, corporations, donors, grant-makers and NGOs as facilitators, not drivers, of change. A perfunctory consultation is insufficient; ABCD initiatives typically encompass more than that; they are driven by the communities themselves.

Figure 4: Community change agent framework

As the framework above illustrates, previous approaches to community development appear to have been largely directive. External agents, such as local government, tend to engage the community largely through some level of consultation, at which point the community reverts to the role of passive clients. It is vital for the community to become active participants.

Interestingly, if, during an ABCD engagement, we had ourselves remained neutral, playing the role of expert facilitators, then, somewhat like the chemical definition of a catalyst, we believe we would have been left unmoved by the immersive experience of community development, and our own practices would have been unchanged by our
engagement with community members. Instead, we discovered that, as we began to engage in an honest, meaningful, and shared process to co-create their preferred future, both parties were empowered and transformed.

6.1 How should external agents respond?

Where current asset-based approaches tend to flounder is around the response by the external agent to community-initiated activities. Rather than attempting to fund community ideas and proposals, we argue that it is better to reward action and initiative. Therefore, importantly, no financial support is provided by the external agent to kick-start a project, unlike in most CSI projects.

Rather, it is the community members themselves who kick-start a project with their own funds, and grants made by the external agent are used to match funds first raised by the community. As a result, ownership, from the get-go, resides with the community itself, and not with the external agent. It is this responsive investment that rewards success, creating a virtuous cycle of positive action. This experimental approach to funding co-leverages the capacity of the communities to raise and manage their own funds for their projects.

The role of the external agent in ABCD, whether it be a grantmaker or an NGO, as should be made clear from the start, is to facilitate the process, help build capacity, offer limited technical advice, or assist in linkages with possible partners where needed, and not initially to provide funds.
7. Considerations for policy makers

The causes of poverty may be complex and multi-dimensional but the solution is perhaps simpler than we realise – why not help people create jobs for themselves so they can buy the food, education, housing and health they need…

(Dr. Andre Rose, Public Health Specialist
University of the Free State)

The above quote, albeit made somewhat tongue in cheek, does illustrate an important point: that citizens may be better served when they drive their own development pathway and leverage their own assets in the process. It may be useful for policy makers to be able to succinctly differentiate between policies that are needs-based versus those that strengthen community assets in a systematic way, as helpfully summarised by Russell (2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Needs-/Deficit-based</th>
<th>Asset-based</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>• Changing the community through increased services.</td>
<td>• Changing the community through citizen involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>• Institutional reform.</td>
<td>• Citizen-centred production.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>• Leaders are professional staff.</td>
<td>• Leaders are widening circles of active citizens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Accountable to institutional stakeholders.</td>
<td>• Accountable to the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of assets</td>
<td>• Assets are system inputs.</td>
<td>• Assets are dots to connect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Asset mapping is data collection.</td>
<td>• Asset-mapping is self-realisation and leadership development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production resource</td>
<td>• Money is the key resource.</td>
<td>• Relationships are the key resource.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Falls apart without money.</td>
<td>• Falls apart when money becomes the focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating challenge</td>
<td>• How do we get citizens involved?</td>
<td>• How do we channel and build on all this citizen participation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System dynamic</td>
<td>• Tends to spread itself thinner over time.</td>
<td>• Tends to snowball over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>• Success is service outcomes, measured mostly by institutional stakeholders.</td>
<td>• Success is capacity, measured mostly by relationships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Systematic divergence of needs-based vs. asset-based approaches, (Russell, 2009)

We suggest that asset-based approaches can be institutionalised at policy level, especially at local government level, and supported by a national strategy. This would require all municipalities to work with communities to assess local assets, co-design innovative projects, and more genuinely let the community take the lead in the management of these initiatives and the monitoring of success.

![Community led development diagram](image)

**Figure 5: Strategies for policy makers**

We propose that these approaches may better help push the developmental agenda in South Africa, particularly to the benefit of the rural poor. This asset-based community development approach significantly appears to strengthen capacity building, and thus complements the needs-based service delivery mode of local government.
8. Conclusion

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has”

Margaret Mead.

An honest process of self-reflection is required by community developers within government, civil society, and the private sector around the deficiencies of existing approaches. At the same time, fundamental new approaches should be explored, many of which may quite possibly already exist in the very communities that we seek to serve and uplift.

What we have seen in our various community engagements is that a greater alliance between community developers and the community themselves needs to be forged, and a greater alignment of policies and programmes that draw from communities themselves should be sought. We were surprised at the remarkable ability of the community members to unlock their own assets and invest it rather efficiently. We are increasingly convinced that approaching a community with an asset-based mind-set better helps both them and us rediscover their own capacity to act, potentially in such a way as to break the poverty trap, both at individual level, as well as at family and community level.

Could these ABCD pilots across South Africa possibly herald a move towards a more citizen-led development, away from current approaches of development that either a) emphasise supplying the needs and requests of dependent clients or b) is driven by the unilateral requirements and demands of the external change agent, be it a government department, aid agency, charitable giver or philanthropic donor? Or is it, as doubters would have it, yet another panacea for development that we are trumpeting, one that ignores the dire plight of communities that consider themselves trapped in poverty? There are no easy answers.

Nevertheless, as an external agent ourselves, we have found ourselves changed along with the communities we have had the privilege to work with. We are increasingly sure that, in the words of Rev. Moses Coady, founder of the Coady International Institute, there is real power in “using what we do have to get what we do not have.”
9. References


